

Numbers 21. 4 – 9

John 3. 1 – 17

Fr Alex

A man was searching for something on the ground in his front garden, and his friend happened to walk past. 'What have you lost?' he asked? 'My keys,' the man said. So they both went down on their knees and looked for them.

After a while the friend started to get a bit fed up and asked, 'Where exactly did you drop them?' 'Inside the house,' the man answered. 'Then why on earth are we looking for them in the garden?' 'Because there's more light out here.'

It's a silly little story, but it put me in mind of this encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus that we've just heard. In this incredibly rich and mysterious part of John's Gospel, Nicodemus, the well-respected leader of the Jews, comes *by night*... to talk to Jesus, the very *light* of the world – and cannot see what he is looking at. He thinks he knows what he's looking for, but his questions reveal that he doesn't know where to look for it.

Like the man looking for his keys in the garden, he's looking for the truth where there is more light for him: in the physical world, things that he can see and touch and measure. But ironically, he's still in the dark.

But Jesus is guiding him into the true light: pointing him upwards to heaven, and outwards in the realm of the Spirit.

Nicodemus often gets a lot of flak from preachers and commentators as the epitome of the misguided Pharisee – asking all the wrong questions, and never quite getting what Jesus is saying to him.

He's often contrasted with the Samaritan woman in the next chapter – the outcast, who unlike the learned teacher Nicodemus, is able to identify Jesus as the Saviour of the world, and immediately gives testimony to all those around her.

But Nicodemus gets there, by the end of the Gospel. And what this and all the other encounters in John's Gospel say to me, is that there isn't just one way to come to faith.

My own faith journey was more like Nicodemus', than the Samaritan woman's. I have perhaps been a bit envious of other Christians who had had that amazing conversion experience, that sudden movement from one way of living to another, in Christ.

But mine was more gradual, growing up within the Church, slowly but surely coming to an understanding of my faith through encounters with Christ, as Nicodemus does here and further on in the Gospel. And slowly learning what it means to live in the Spirit.

I think we're given this reading on the Second Sunday of Lent, because in a sense that's what our journey through Lent is like. It isn't a sudden explosive movement from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day.

Rather, it's a process of slowly attuning ourselves to the work of the Spirit, and looking for signs of its work in our lives. As Jesus says, although we can't see the Spirit, just like we can't see the wind: we are able to identify its operation within us and within the world, just as we can see the effects of the wind, or hear it blowing.

We were all born again by water in baptism, but that by itself isn't enough. Unless we are born again by the Spirit – unless we attune ourselves to the work of the Spirit and turn our hearts and minds towards the One from whom it comes – then we cannot enter the kingdom of God.

We do that partly through devoting ourselves to prayer; by careful study of God's word; by regular engagement with the sacraments; by acts of charity and goodwill – all the things the Church calls us to do in Lent.

Nicodemus, however, can't grasp this sense of the spiritual life – he thinks of this birth in his own human terms. "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" But Jesus says that "what is born of the flesh is flesh." In other words, what is merely human can only give birth to what is human – here for a short time, then gone. But what is born of life in the Spirit is *eternal*.

Martin Luther put it quite snappily in his German Bible: 'Born once, die twice; born twice, die once.' That is, without the spiritual rebirth (the 'second birth'), then at the end of our lives we will die 'twice': a physical death, and a spiritual death.

But if we go through that second birth in the Spirit, then at the end of our lives only the physical will die. We will live on spiritually with Christ for eternity.

And this is what's at the heart of our Gospel reading, and our celebration of this whole season of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. The gift of *life* in Jesus.

As the last two verses of our Gospel so beautifully assure us, our God seeks not to *punish* our sinful human nature. Instead, he does an astonishing thing, and descends to earth in Jesus to take our humanity upon himself.

And through his death on the cross, his resurrection, and his ascension, he *raises up* that humanity to be with God, in the ultimate renewal of his creation. It is our rebirth by water and the Spirit that gives us access to this amazing future.

But all of that is to come. It is Jesus' death on the cross, of course, that we focus on first in Lent – and today, Jesus ends his conversation with Nicodemus by foretelling the crucifixion. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up."

In the reading from the Book of Numbers, we heard that the people are attacked by poisonous snakes, and many of them die. The Lord has compassion on them and instructs Moses to make a serpent of bronze, and put it on a pole – whoever is bitten by a snake will look at this serpent, and live.

The means of their survival is an image of the very thing that is causing their death; lifted up on a pole for them to look at.

In the same way, on Good Friday, our salvation is achieved by Jesus taking upon himself the very thing that causes our physical and spiritual death – our human nature – as he lifts it up to God, on the cross.

As we gaze upon Christ this Lent, lifted up on the cross for our sakes, and lifting up our humanity to God: may we seek to enter afresh into the life of the Spirit, and turn our hearts and minds towards God; so that we may claim with confidence the new and eternal life he offers us at Easter. Amen.